

## Opinion

### Crows, Bobs, Tits, Elfs and Pixies: The Phoney "Common Name" Phenomenon

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**Abstract.** Arguments are presented against use of common names by lepidopterists. Common names 1) are not universal; 2) neither serve as succinct labels nor clearly define relationships; 3) are language specific, and therefore hinder communication among scientists; and 4) often have been concocted, mainly at publishers' requests, on the assumption that laypersons cannot learn latinized names. Thus common names are also inherently insulting.

In Europe the "Scarce Swallowtail", *Graphium podalirius*, is scarcely scarce, while the "Scarce Fritillary", *Euphydryas maturna*, truly is. That's scarcely the only problem with common names. Another is that the Scarce Fritillary is a *Euphydryas*, a member of a genus scarcely called anything but "checkerspot" by North American collectors. And, in spite of their common names, the "Blue-branded King Crow", the "Malaysian Albattross", the "Painted Jezebel", the "Contiguous Swift", the "Sumatran Bob", the "Fluffy Tit", and the "Chocolate Tiger" are all just plain butterflies (Corbet and Pendlebury, 1956). In the face of such confusion, the Lepidopterists' Society has recently formed a committee to standardize and presumably stabilize common names. We argue that such a task is not only virtually impossible, but worse than useless since it lends legitimacy to the use of common names and that is against the best interests of lepidopterists.

Unfortunately, many new common names for North American butterflies have been coined recently at the request of publishers of butterfly guides. One obvious difficulty in standardizing these common names is that there are only about a dozen or so true, common names of Nearctic butterflies — ones whose use has developed naturally over time. Several of these refer to more (or less) than a single species. Amateurs and professionals alike recognize "Red Admiral" and "Painted Lady", although few use those names in preference to *Vanessa atalanta* and *V. cardui*. The "Red-spotted

Purple" and "Banded Purple" are well-known common names that apply to subspecies; "Tiger Swallowtail" is one that applies to a species group (and is most commonly applied to *Papilio glaucus*). Perhaps the *only* common names widely used by amateur and professional alike in the Nearctic region are "Monarch", "Viceroy", and "Mourning Cloak".

The rest of the so-called common names are not really common at all. Many widespread butterflies have been given several "common" names. And, many of those names are only regional in usage. Even in the literature on pest insects, where there is a tradition of using common names, ambiguity in butterfly names exists. Is *Pieris rapae* the "Small White", the "Cabbage White", or the "Cabbage Butterfly"? Is *Colias eurytheme* the "Orange Sulphur" or the "Alfalfa Butterfly"?

Common names do not serve well for either of the two functions of nomenclature: expression of relationships and communication. Inability to indicate relationships is particularly apparent in Europe where whites are both pierids and satyrines, and fritillaries are nymphalines and a riodinid (*Hamearis lucina*, the "Duke of Burgundy Fritillary"). Indeed, in Europe there are fully five genera called whites, seven genera of browns, seven of graylings, and an incredible fourteen genera called fritillaries (of course, many of these "genera" would better be considered subgenera—Ehrlich and Murphy, 1982).

Lack of communication is exemplified by some of the recently minted "common names". How many North American lepidopterists recognize the "Mimic", the "Elf", the "Pixie", the "Laure", the "Blue Wing", or the "Goldspot Aguna" (Pyle, 1981)? It also shows up in the invention of veritable phrases to identify species—*Colias nastes* has become the "Pale Arctic Clouded Yellow". Too many blues, graylings, woods, and ringlets? Make some anomalous blues, banded graylings, speckled woods and brassy ringlets. . . then to this add on top yet another word or two for the specific identity. Hence many common names do not provide the basic function of names or labels, as *succinct alternatives for descriptive phrases*. Of course, this was the original purpose of the binomen; before Linnaeus, short Latin phrases were used as designations of species.

Not surprisingly, common names are often outright misleading. For instance, the "Larger Lantana Butterfly" (Pyle, 1981), *Tmolus echion*, is the size of a dime. And, while *Melitaea deserticola* is the "Desert Fritillary", *Erebia epiphron*, not *Erebia montana*, is the "Mountain Ringlet" (Higgins and Riley, 1970).

The relationships/communication problem is further complicated when Nearctic and Palaearctic names are compared. Except for *Polygonia comma*, all North American *Polygonia* are not commas as in Europe but are anglewings. *Coenonympha* are heaths in Europe and ringlets in North America, while *Erebia* are ringlets in Europe and alpiners in North America. Flying with alpiners, of course, are arctics, *Oeneis*, in North

America but these are called graylings in Europe. The full extent of the discordance of Nearctic and Palaearctic names becomes apparent when viewing the common names of some genera of just two families, the Nymphalidae and the Pieridae (Figure 1).

A functional system of unambiguous Holarctic butterfly common names would necessitate wholesale changes on both sides of the Atlantic; "we" could agree to give up "Mourning Cloak" and accept "Camberwell Beauty" if "they" would drop "Small Copper" and use "American Copper". Or, if a priority system were instituted, we in North America would be subject to a complete turnover in names, including some of the very few recognizable ones. Certainly, no such thing will happen, but if it did the resulting English language specific common names would meld only the Americans and the British. There is no excuse for excluding non-English names. The Spanish should not be forced to call their commonest swallowtail "scarce" because it rarely reaches Britain.

On the other hand, English-speaking lepidopterists clearly do not have a monopoly on idiotic common names. Arguing that six other European countries had their own "nombres vulgares", Agenjo (1965) invented in a single sweep 199 Spanish common names including "Cervantes" for the only *Erynnis* in Spain, "Ajedrezada Viril" ("Virile Chequer") for *Pyrgus bellieri* because of its "gran deserrallo de su andropigio", and "Pedrico" for *H. lucina*, the only riordinine in Spain, in remembrance of successful collecting with his cousin Pedro Alfaro! Agenjo returns British chauvinism by naming *Carterocephalus palaemon* "Fronteriza" since it was known only from the Spanish-French border (indeed, it has been taken since in several locations well to the south—M. Gomez-Bustillo, pers. comm.). Germans have contributed their share of useless common names as the three widespread German *Euphydryas* well illustrate (Higgins and Riley, 1970). *Euphydryas maturna* is the "Kleiner Maivogel" ("Small May-flier") although it is not particularly small and normally flies in June and July. *Euphydryas intermedia* is the "Veilchen-Schreckenfaller" ("Violet Checkerspot") although it has neither a larval nor an adult association with that plant. Only the common name of *Euphydryas aurinia*, the "Skabiosen-Schreckenfaller" ("Scabious Checkerspot"), correctly identifies a host association!

The implicit argument of publishers—and the stated reason in Higgins and Riley (1970)—for the use of common names is that amateurs, particularly beginners, cannot learn latinized names. Why lepidopterists at any level should be subject to this insult is beyond us. Gardeners quite easily handle *Rhododendron*, *Eucalyptus*, and *Chrysanthemum*; birders use *Vireo* and *Junco*; and most five-year-olds know *Rhinoceros* and *Gorilla*, latinized names certainly no easier than *Papilio*, *Colias*, or *Pieris*. The doltish-beginner argument is all the more ridiculous since a good number of recently manufactured common names are considerably more difficult



SATYRINAE

*Erebia*  
*Aphantopus*  
*Coenonympha*  
*Hyponephele*  
*Pyronia*  
*Lasiommata*  
*Lopinga*  
*Kirinia*  
*Maniola*  
*Satyrodes*  
*Gyrocheilus*  
*Satyrus*  
*Euptychia*  
*Paramacera*  
*Neominois*  
*Oeneis*  
*Arenthusana*  
*Brintesia*  
*Berberia*  
*Hipparchia*  
*Pseudotergumia*  
*Pseudochazara*  
*Melanargia*

Arguses  
 Alpines  
 Ringlets  
 Heaths  
 Browns  
 Satyrs  
 Arctics  
 Graylings  
 Whites  
 Marbles  
 Orangetips  
 Oranges  
 Yellows  
 Sulphurs

LYCAENIDAE

*Aricia*  
*Kretania*  
*Eumedonia*

PIERIDAE

*Ascia*  
*Appias*  
*Neophasia*  
*Leptidea*  
*Aporia*  
*Pieris*  
*Pontia*  
*Euchloe*  
*Anthocharis*  
*Colotis*  
*Zegris*  
*Eurema*  
*Nathalis*  
*Colias*  
*Anteos*  
*Phoebis*

Figure 1. Illustration of the broad discordance between European (—) and North America (---) common names in Nymphalidae and Pieridae. A few cases of agreement are shown (— · —). Note that some of the "genera" are considered subgenera by some authors.

than latinized names—in Europe *Brenthis ino* is the "Lesser Marbled Fritillary" and *Erebia nivalis* is "de Lesse's Brassy Ringlet". Still other common names are direct bastardizations of the latinized names and thus offer no advantage at all—in North America we have "Columella Hairstreaks", "Egleis Fritillaries", and "Arachne Checkerspots", among dozens of direct translations. In any case, latinized binomens are a mandatory aspect of a beginner's entry into the study and enjoyment of butterflies and are the universal currency for communication with associates, amateur and professional.

In conclusion, we appeal to the committee to stabilize common names to take as its first action its own dissolution. What needs to be done with common names is to discourage their use whenever possible. Lepidopterists should remember that, while they argue the comparative merits of worthless common names, the "Scarce Swallowtail" and the "Scarce Fritillary" are both becoming scarcer. There is so much to be learned about butterflies and so little time before so many are extinct, that to have people wasting their time haggling over whether *Xus albus* should be the

Greasy Dart or the Sleazy Tart is simply preposterous. Common names in any language should be restricted to those very few recognized by the general public, while lepidopterists should use latinized names—exclusively!

*Acknowledgments.* The insolvable confusion caused by common names became apparent over *cerveza de barril* during charter meetings of the Holarctic Lepidopterists' Union in Madrid, Spain. Both authors and the editor of this journal each claimed that the common name of *Mellicta britomartis* was, in fact, a memorial to himself.

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